Review of Shavit's The New Imagined Community

Uriya Shavit, *The New Imagined Community: Global Media and the Construction of National and Muslim Identities of Migrants*, Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009, vii + 209 pp., ISBN 978-1-84519-328-7, $74.95 or £49.95.

This book by an Israeli scholar based at Tel Aviv University is based on interviews with a number of primarily Arab Muslims based in mosques in Frankfurt, but with reflections on the situation in other European cities both within and beyond Germany. Particular gratitude is expressed to the many German Muslims who agreed to speak to the author about sensitive issues at a very sensitive time, fully aware of his Israeli nationality, and for the lessons which their willingness to do this provided in terms of trust and tolerance (p. vii).

The main thesis of the book is that while the processes of globalisation on the one hand result in what could be described as standardisation and homogenisation, the technological vehicles of the process, particularly its communication technologies, can also result in the creation of what might be called 'enclave cultures', whereby human beings physically situated in one geographical part

of the world are 'virtually', in the sense of linguistically, culturally and intellectually, in another part of the world, their ancestral homeland. In the case of the United Kingdom this is well illustrated by the debates among Muslims of South Asian origin about where they would prefer deceased relatives to be buried – in the UK or in Pakistan - and the author illustrates effectively how the same issue works out for Muslims of Arab origin in Germany. What he calls 'territorial affiliations', in other words traditional national allegiances, far from being challenged or weakened by migration, are actually being reinforced and perpetuated by media instruments such as the internet and satellite TV. Alongside this process migrants in Muslim-minority situations also find themselves as players in the construction of a truly global, or transnational, *umma* (community).

The argument is developed in two parts, with the titles of both parts, interestingly, beginning with the phrase 'Imagination from afar', the first concentrating on theories of the nation state, and the second then focusing on the *umma*, somewhat misleadingly described as 'the Muslim nation' (though it is of course difficult to find any effective single word translation of a term with so rich and complex a meaning as *umma*). Both parts make good use,

particularly in Chapters 4 and 8, of the author's series of interviews with a wide variety of migrants from many different pats of the world, including some Turks, for Part I, and then with a number of Arab Muslims for Part II, in Frankfurt and the surrounding state of Hesse, conducted between December 2006 and November 2007. Frankfurt is described as 'a migration scholar's paradise' on p.61, because of its claim to be world's smallest metropolis, and good use is made by the author in his interviews of this helpful combination of wide diversity and manageable size.

It is some of the individual biographies discussed in the book which provide some of the most interesting material. Chapter 4 contains the story of Robin, originally from Northern Ireland, who while a student in Edinburgh met and married Helena, from northern Germany. They spent some time in London and then moved together to Frankfurt, where he spends his time increasingly focused on Northern Ireland, through daily internet visits. There is an interesting discussion of why his focus on his ancestral homeland is increasing rather than decreasing (pp. 90-91). 'Sojourners can now create individual national bubbles in their living rooms and offices without any connection to other sojourners, to ethnic establishments or to relatives and friends at home.' (p. 95).

Part II focuses on Muslim thinking in particular, including a discussion of the ideas of Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Muhammad al-Ghazali and others about the role and purpose of Muslims in the West. Is it to affirm Muslim identity and actively spread message of Islam through the establishment of a kind of parallel society? Or is there a viable alternative view, of Muslims as active participants in Western societies, not necessarily assimilating but adapting sufficiently to no longer be perceived as alien, as outlined in the argument of Tariq Ramadan that Muslims in Europe should seek independence, intellectually, economically and politically, of religious scholars in Arab countries and Arab governments (p. 115)? The contributions to the debate of Amr Khaled (pp. 116-120 + pp. 131-135), IslamOnline (pp. 130-132), Islamway.com (pp. 135-138), 'Sheikh Google' (p. 164), and German-language Muslim websites such as that of Abu Hamza/Pierre Vogel, a German-born boxer who converted to Islam (p. 168), are also discussed, and there is a valuable discussion about the role of other converts (those born into other faith communities) and reverts (those from culturally Muslim backgrounds discovering or rediscovering Islam later in life) on pp. 172-177.

The summary of Part Two, on pp. 186-190, outlines the five generally-agreed duties of Muslims living in the West, according to Muslim Arab religious scholars, contrasted with the more recent alternative view of Muslims as constructive participants in the societies in which they now live. Will the vision of Al-Qaradawi or the vision of Amr Khaled come to dominate? In seeking to answer the question the author points to the limitations of the vision of global *umma*, particularly that there is no single vision of what this means, so that the Muslim nation is virtual rather than even imagined (p. 188). The absence of entertainment, sport or gossip (p.189) limits its appeal to media consumers, and language problems, the fact of the second generation not knowing Arabic or English, are also important. The author's conclusion is that marginalization favours those encouraging the establishment of 'the Muslim nation'. Where European states incorporate, cultivate, and supervise Islam radical elements will fail. Where European nation-states close their eyes and hearts, however, the imagined Muslim nation will thrive (pp. 189-90).

The book as a whole is thus a significant contribution to the debate about belonging and identity which is central to the agendas of

several political parties in Western Europe today. 'Can the (Western European) body politic … survive … a plurality of identities?' (p. 5). This is of course not only a dilemma for Western European (receiving) nations, as it is also a challenge for Middle Eastern (receiving) nations, whose citizens, even if no longer resident within their borders, expect to be able continue to continue to contribute to internal debates, with potentially extremely significant consequences, as ex-President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt has recently discovered to his cost.

This is not a new process. The Protestant Reformation in England was, at certain stages, sustained by exiles who found themselves driven to take refuge in the Netherlands, while those aspiring to bring about either its Catholic equivalent or the re-assertion of traditional Catholicism were sustained by exiles in France. At a later stage, when their position became untenable in France groups such as the Jesuits found refuge among other places in England, and so the process of seeking to disseminate religious ideas has gone on. In the case of Muslim communities since 1945, the geographical distances involved are greater and now, with satellite TV and the internet, the speed with which the debates unfold is much greater, but this does not mean that the debates are new.

One could push the debate very much further back historically too, by considering the debates between exiled and Jerusalem-based communities within Judaism in the biblical period.

The author makes very clear at the end of his introduction the importance of his own biography for the development of his interest in the subject, which was stimulated by his reading an interview with an Israeli football player who moved to Britain and lived there for a decade or so. While there as a player he never watched any match from the Israeli premier league, but all this changed once satellite television became available, as it then became possible to watch every match. This experience was mirrored by the author's own experience when he moved as a 10-year old boy to a suburb of Bonn, when he clung to accounts of Israeli football as much as possible, as a ritual 'that was essential in organizing my rhythm of life and in attaching my identity to the community I was born into' (p. 8) 'I longed for the *Israeli* football ritual not so much for love of the art of football … but because its well engraved structure and its familiarity gave me a sense of order, belonging and familiar pleasure' (p. 8). The importance of family as well as academic connections in the research for the book is also acknowledged, for example to his brother, who works for Israel's 'Yes' satellite TV

company, for his help with the workings of satellite TV, and to his sister who provided advice on the use of the Internet as an educational tool.

Consuming images from the homeland in a manner that obliterates the geographical gap between home and away, for example via Skype (which is discussed on pp. 55-58), is thus clearly demonstrated to be 'a development of transformative potential (p. 9), and particularly through some of its comparative illustrations this book is a valuable contribution to the study of this process.

Hugh Goddard

University of Edinburgh